

Effects of News Media on Political Opinions: Do the Media Inform or  
Influence?

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kerri Pickel". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Kerri" and last name "Pickel" clearly legible.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1993

May 8, 1993

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Media & Political Opinions

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Do the Media Inform or Influence?**

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**Running Head: Media & Political Opinions**

**ABSTRACT**

This research tests the potential of the media to influence the public's potential voting behavior and attitudes towards political candidates during a political campaign. This study involved a survey of 99 voters questioned immediately after casting their ballots for the 1992 presidential election, and experimental research with 83 college students as subjects. The survey results show that most voters do not believe the media have an influence over them concerning politics. Manipulation of a news story, however, can cause a significant change in subjects' beliefs about two candidates, but caused no significant change in subjects' final choice of candidate.

## INTRODUCTION

Whenever politics happens, representatives of the news media are close to follow. This tendency for the media to follow political happenings is especially noticeable during political campaigns. The question then becomes one of media impact on public opinion: do the media simply inform the public, or do media reports influence public opinion regarding candidates?

Many researchers have indicated that print media may have the potential to influence public opinion. Bortz and Braune (1980) indicate that a print medium can cause clear attitude changes consistent with the political stance of the newspaper when the issues in question are controversial, even when subjects give the particular newspaper negative ratings. Political article reading can also affect people's abilities to perceive image differences between candidates (Choi & Becker, 1987).

Loftus and Palmer (1974) have also demonstrated that changing one critical word in a recall question can affect subjects' recall of the severity of an automobile accident. It is possible that these findings could apply to changes in wording in a written article as well.

Davidson (1983) shows that in some circumstances people will expect others to be more strongly influenced by certain communications than themselves. By Davidson's findings, we would expect that voters would not expect their own opinions to be

affected by any perceived media bias.

The present study tests the potential for a printed news story to influence subjects' opinions about two candidates based on slight changes in wording in a printed news story. Also, a comparison and contrast is made between the experimental findings and voters' responses on a self-report survey concerning their perception of media influence on their opinions of candidates in an actual election. Predictions were that the voters surveyed would not expect their opinions to be influenced by the media, and that the experimental subjects, however, would show a significant difference in reported opinions of two candidates (between subjects) based on a variation in wording in the story.

## METHOD

### Study 1:

Subjects: 99 randomly selected voters from Muncie, Indiana, exiting the polls after casting their ballot in the 1992 presidential election.

Procedure: Subjects were approached and asked to complete a survey to assess whether they believed they were well-informed about the election, whether they believe the media to be fair in coverage of political and campaign news, and whether they believed the media had an influence over their opinions of the candidates in the election.

### Study 2:

Subjects: 83 undergraduate psychology students.

Procedure: Subjects were randomly assigned to read one of two forms of a mock news story in which two fictitious gubernatorial candidates' stands on the issues of taxes and pollution were discussed. In one condition, one candidate was described as planning to **lower** taxes; in the second condition that candidate was described as planning to **slash** taxes. Students then

completed a questionnaire which tested recall as well as measured the degree to which the subject thought each candidate would change taxes, the subjects' opinions of each candidate, and asked for which candidate the subject would vote based on the information in the given story.

Although the candidates' names were taken from an actual Louisiana gubernatorial election, all opinions and actions of the candidates were fabricated.

## RESULTS

### Study 1:

The results of the voter survey show that a majority of voters did not believe the media influenced their opinions during the 1992 presidential campaign. Also see table 1.

### Study 2:

Figures 1 and 2 show the most interesting differences found in the experimental study. The manipulation produced a very significant difference in the subjects' opinions of one candidate. The increased difference between the opinion ratings of the two candidates was expressed in a drop in the rating of the opposing candidate rather than the expected increase in the rating of the favored candidate ( $t=2.62$ ,  $p=.01$ , see figure 1, on right).

A marginally significant difference in the predicted direction was also found between conditions in the amount subjects expected the candidate Broussard to decrease taxes ( $t=1.62$ ,  $p=.05$ , one tailed).

Although there was no significant difference in subjects' actual choice of candidate between conditions, the trend was in the expected direction, with Broussard gaining more votes in the slash condition (see figure 2).



## DISCUSSION

Although the results did not entirely reflect the expected outcome, this study supports previous studies which show that the printed media can affect voter's opinions or perceptions of a candidate's image. Also, the voters surveyed in this study did not think their opinions were affected by the media. Subjects' comments included comments such as, "I make my own decisions," or, "It's my choice and no one can change it." The experimental data collected in the second part of this study show that these statements are not entirely true.

Although actual candidate choice was not significantly affected by the manipulation in the experimental study, altering word choice to make one candidate seem more appealing did significantly ( $p=.01$ ) widen the gap in subjects' opinion ratings of the candidates. However, the increased difference in ratings between the candidates was seen as a drop in the rating of the opposing candidate rather than an increase in the rating of the favored candidate, possibly because with the rather limited information the subjects had on either candidate, they did not feel comfortable rating either candidate very strongly. So instead of one candidate being rated more favorably, the other was rated less favorably as a result of the manipulation.

Also, a stronger positive opinion correlation was found with the issue of environmental concern than with the issue of tax

decreases. A stronger effect may have been found had a less salient issue been used to balance the tax issue.

The finding that voters do not expect that their own opinions will be influenced could be explained by the third-person effect as described by Davidson (1983). Although people do not see themselves as influenced by the communication in the news media, they may expect others to be. This question was not addressed in the current study, but would be interesting to include in a future study.

Overall, the results of this study show that although many people do not believe their opinions are influenced by the media, many people's opinions actually *can* be influenced. Perhaps future research can follow the effects of print media influence over a longer period of time to investigate the possibility of a continued influence on opinions becoming an influence on actual candidate choice.

## REFERENCES

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- Choi, H. C., & Becker, S. L. (1987). Media use, issue/image discriminations, and voting. Communication Research, 14 (3), 267-291.
- Davidson, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. Public Opinion Quarterly, 47, 1-15.
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## Results of voter survey

Of 99 voters surveyed:

Age: 76.8% were 18 to 25 years old  
79.8% were students

Gender: 52.5% were male  
47.5% were female

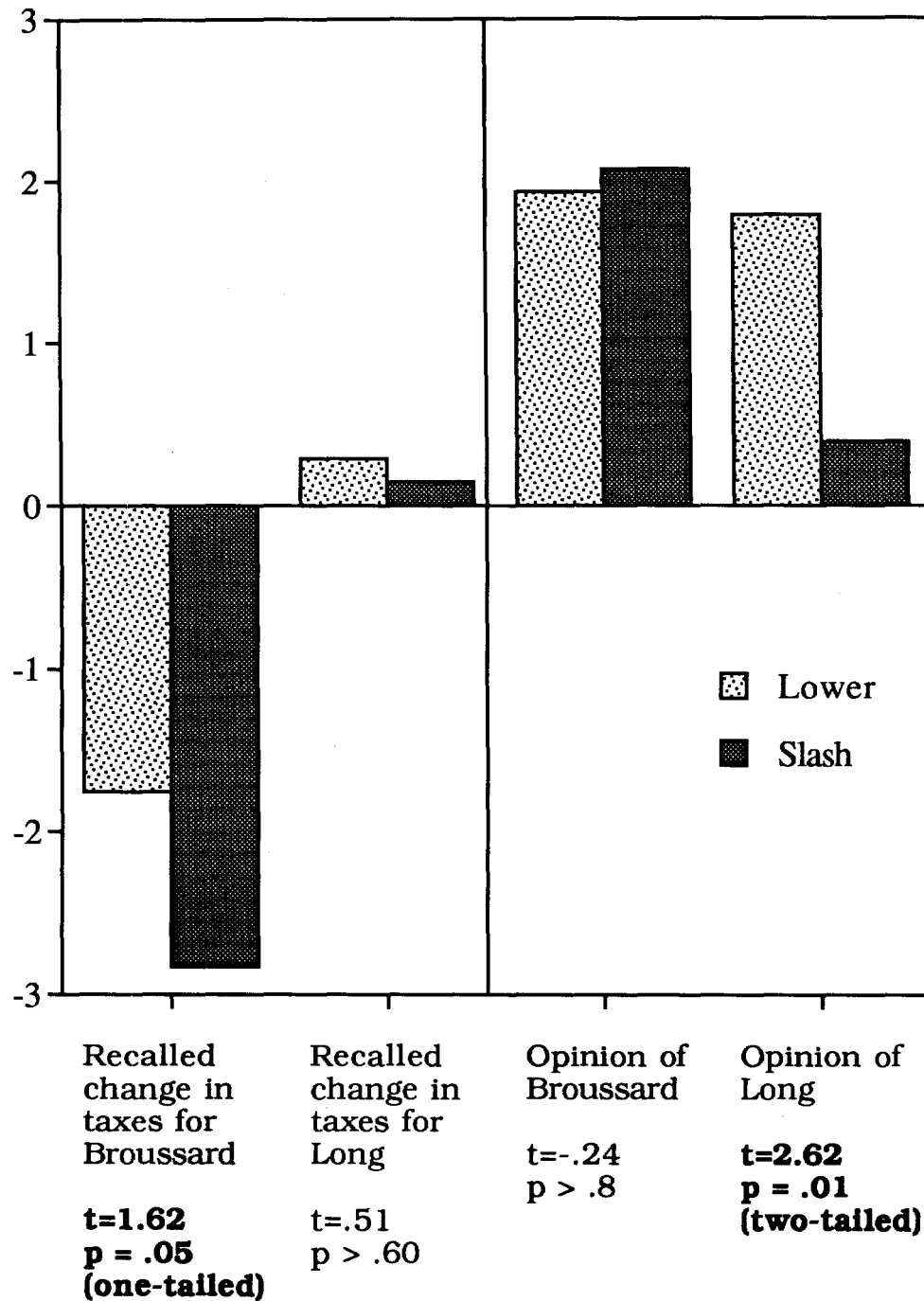
86% reported they were well-informed about  
the candidates and issues in the  
presidential election  
(no response in 6 cases)

60% responded that they did not believe the  
media were fair in their reporting  
during the presidential campaign  
(no response in 9 cases)

67.4% expressed they believe the media  
coverage did not influence their  
opinions during the presidential  
campaign  
(no response in 4 cases)

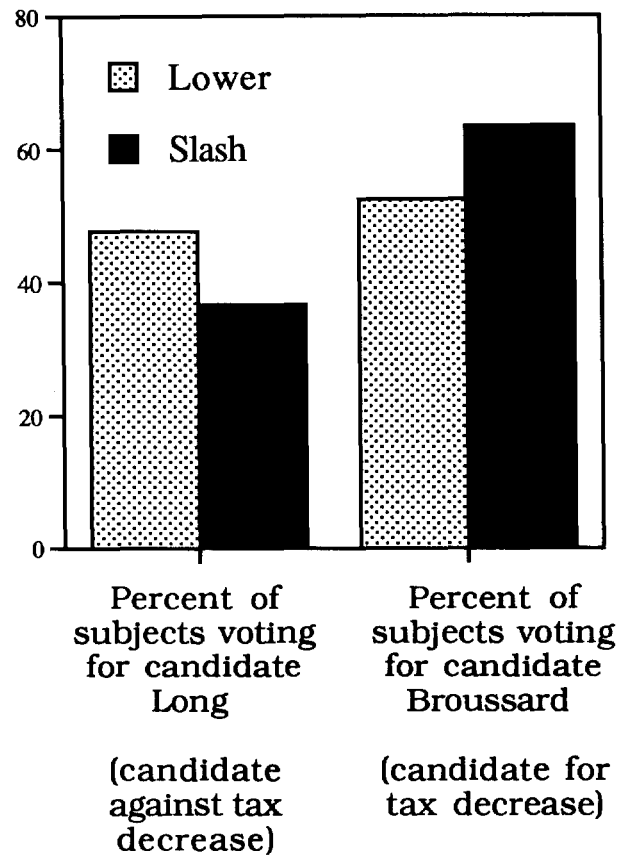
**TABLE 1**

Difference in estimation of tax change and in  
opinions of the candidates between groups



**FIGURE 1**

Percentage of subjects in lower  
and slash conditions voting for  
each candidate



**FIGURE 2**

## APPENDIX A: News story used in experiment

# Long raises Broussard's hackles

Candidates go head to head in debate, despite lack of real hair on one

by John Springer  
staff writer

Aaron Broussard, candidate for governor, admitted during the gubernatorial debate yesterday that the immaculately combed hair on his head isn't his own, but is a toupee.

Broussard made the admission in response to opponent Earl Long's accusations that "a candidate who would use a cover-up for such a simple issue as baldness couldn't be trusted to run the whole state."

Broussard said that he has nothing to hide, and joked that he wears the hairpiece "so the news cameras won't burn up from the glare coming off my head." He said that no tax money had been used to fund his new head of hair, express-

ing again that he is committed to **(lowering/slashing)** taxes if he is elected.

The exchanges between the two candidates were lively during the debate. The major issues addressed by the candidates during the debate, as during most of the campaign to date, were state income taxes and environmental legislation.

Broussard said he plans to **(lower/slash)** state income tax rates for the middle class if he is elected. He says such action "will put more money in the peoples' pockets, where it will best help the state's economy."

Long, however, said taxes should remain steady, in order to keep the state's budget balanced. He said that Broussard's plan to **(lower/slash)** taxes could eventually raise state unemployment rates.

The two have also been at odds concerning the environmental legislation, arguing spe-

cifically over a bill supported by Long which would put tighter restraints on allowable pollution from factories.

"If we can make this bill into a law, it could clean up our environment by as much as 20 percent," Long said. "There are too many factories that have been polluting our back yards for too long, and it's high time we make them stop."

Broussard agreed that the environment is an important issue, but said the factories' operations are important to the economy, and imposing restrictions on them might cause them to move their operations out of state.

"If you want to talk about causing unemployment to rise, driving factories out of the state will do it, and my tax plan won't," Broussard said. "If we want to get our economy back on its feet, we can't drive all our employers away."